**YVCipedia REPTILES**

Bearded Dragon Care Sheet

## **Species Overview**

Bearded dragons (*Pogona vitticeps*) are medium-sized, ground-dwelling lizards native to the arid deserts and woodlands of central Australia. They get their name from the expandable, spiky “beard” under their chin, which they use for communication and defense. Popular for their calm temperament and ease of handling, they are among the most common pet reptiles in the U.S.

Adults typically reach **12–24 inches** long, including their tail, and can live **8–12 years** with proper care. These lizards are diurnal (active during the day) and are known to recognize their owners and even develop routines around feeding and interaction.

## **Housing & Environment**

Bearded dragons need **spacious, well-ventilated enclosures** that allow for natural behaviors like basking, climbing, and exploring. A minimum size for adults is generally **75–120 gallons**, with a 4×2×2 ft enclosure recommended. Larger is always better, offering more room for heat gradients and enrichment.

Inside the enclosure, provide climbing branches and sturdy rocks for basking. Multiple hides should be offered on both warm and cool sides to help them feel secure. The substrate can vary based on age and owner preference: for juveniles, safe choices include paper towel or reptile carpet to avoid impaction risks; for adults, some experienced keepers use packed soil/sand mixes carefully managed for moisture and cleanliness.

**Key housing considerations:**

* Spacious enclosure with secure top
* Safe, easy-to-clean substrate (paper towel, tile, reptile carpet)
* Multiple climbing and basking spots
* Hiding areas for security
* Daily spot-cleaning with deeper monthly cleaning

## **Heating, Lighting & Humidity**

Bearded dragons are **sun-loving desert reptiles** that need access to strong heat and UVB light to stay healthy. Create a temperature gradient in the enclosure so they can move between warm and cool zones as needed.

The **basking area** should be the hottest spot, reaching **100–110°F**, while the **cool side** stays between **75–85°F**. At night, temperatures can drop to **65–75°F** safely without additional heat in most homes.

UVB lighting is **essential** to prevent metabolic bone disease. Use a **linear T5 HO 10–12% UVB bulb** that runs much of the enclosure’s length. Replace bulbs every 6–12 months even if they still appear bright—UV output diminishes over time. Alternatively you can invest in a UV meter - these are typically quite cost-prohibitive though and it is just as, or more reasonable to simply replace the bulbs frequently.

Humidity should be kept low, **30–40%**, similar to typical room conditions. Higher humidity can lead to respiratory infections.

**Heating and lighting tips:**

* Halogen or basking bulbs for top-down heat
* Ceramic heat emitters if extra nighttime warmth is needed
* Thermostats and dimmers for safety and control
* Digital thermometers to monitor basking and cool sides

## **Water & Hydration**

Even though they come from dry environments, bearded dragons need consistent access to fresh water. Provide a **shallow, sturdy water dish** and change it daily. Many dragons prefer to lick droplets, so occasional light misting may encourage drinking.

Bathing can help with hydration and shedding—soaking in **lukewarm water for 10–15 minutes** once or twice a week is recommended, especially during shed cycles or in dry environments.

## **Diet & Nutrition**

Bearded dragons are **omnivores**, and their diet changes significantly as they grow. Juveniles need a **protein-heavy diet**, while adults eat mostly plants.

Young dragons (under ~12–18 months) should get **70–80% insects** like crickets and roaches, with **20–30% plant matter** such as leafy greens. Adults transition to **70–80% plant-based diet** with **20–30% protein**.

Offer a variety of dark leafy greens (dandelion, collard, mustard), supplemented with vegetables like squash or bell peppers. Fruit can be given occasionally as a treat but should be limited. Insects should be gut-loaded and dusted with calcium and vitamin supplements.

**General feeding guidelines:**

* Juveniles: Daily insects, daily greens
* Adults: Insects 2–3× weekly, daily greens
* Calcium with D3: 5× weekly for juveniles, 2–3× weekly for adults
* Multivitamin: 1× weekly

Feeding in shallow dishes encourages foraging, while removing uneaten insects prevents stress and potential injury.

## **Healthcare & Veterinary Care**

Schedule an **initial veterinary exam** soon after bringing your dragon home and plan for **annual wellness visits**. Common health issues include metabolic bone disease (MBD) from poor UVB or calcium intake, respiratory infections from incorrect humidity or temperature, internal parasites, and impaction from ingesting loose substrate or oversized prey.

**Watch for warning signs:**

* Lethargy, weakness, tremors
* Swollen limbs or jaw
* Poor appetite or weight loss
* Difficulty breathing or wheezing
* Retained or patchy shed

Prompt veterinary care is essential to catch problems early and prevent complications.

## **Behavior & Handling**

Bearded dragons are famous for their **friendly, docile temperament**. Many learn to recognize their owners and even appear to enjoy gentle handling sessions. Always approach from the side rather than overhead (which can trigger defensive behavior), and support their entire body, including their tail.

Short, calm, regular handling sessions help build trust. They may signal stress or dominance with head-bobbing, arm-waving, or beard puffing—read these cues to respect their comfort level.

## **Enrichment & Habitat Design**

A stimulating environment encourages natural behaviors and promotes well-being. Offer climbing branches, basking platforms at different heights, and sturdy hiding places. Rotating décor and rearranging items occasionally can help keep them curious and engaged.

Supervised time outside the enclosure in a safe space can provide additional enrichment and exercise.

## **Fun Facts & FAQs**

* Their signature **“beard”** turns black and puffs out when threatened or showing off.
* Bearded dragons **bob their heads and wave their arms** to communicate.
* Native to **Australia’s hot, rocky deserts**—they’re expert sunbathers.
* They often **recognize their owners** and may eagerly await feeding time.
* With the right care, they can live **over a decade** as calm, engaging companions.

### **Supplies Checklist**

* Large, secure enclosure (≥75–120 gallons)
* Halogen or basking bulbs, ceramic heaters as needed
* Linear T5 HO UVB bulb and fixture
* Thermometers for basking and cool zones
* Safe substrate (paper towel, reptile carpet, tile)
* Climbing branches, rocks, hides
* Shallow water dish
* Calcium with D3, reptile multivitamin
* Live feeder insects, fresh greens
* Feeding tongs and cleaning tools
* Secure carrier for vet visits

*Yarmouth Veterinary Center 2025*